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## CONGRESS

### Waxman: Eliot Ness, Mother Teresa, and Green Giant Rolled Into One



Elton John and Waxman attend the Syringe Access Fund Reception at Open Society Foundations in Washington in July 2012. (Michael Kovac/Getty Images)



By Mike Magner  
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He may be most remembered for grilling the well-to-do—from tobacco executives to baseball great Roger Clemens—but after four decades in Congress, Rep. Henry Waxman's legacy will be best defined by his support for the disadvantaged and his passion for the planet.

Since entering the House with the 1974 class of post-Watergate reformers, the Hollywood Democrat has played leading roles in funding AIDS research, providing children's health insurance, expanding Medicare, and overhauling the health care system.

On the environmental front, Waxman was a driving force behind a stronger Clean Air Act, protection of endangered species, safer drinking water, the removal of lead from paint and gasoline, and a slowly emerging U.S. effort to mitigate climate change.

For all of that, Waxman—a short, stocky, bald, and mustachioed man who turns 75 in September—has been labeled "The Democrats' Eliot Ness" (David Corn, *The Nation*, 2005); "The Scariest Guy in Washington" (Karen Tumulty, *Time*, 2006); and most famously, "sonuvabitch" (by his California colleague, Rep. George Miller, in *National Journal* in 1989).

"When I first came on the Budget Committee, I thought Henry's first name was *sonuvabitch*," Miller told *NJ* for a feature on Waxman 25 years ago. "Everybody who had to deal with it kept saying, 'Do you know what that sonuvabitch Waxman wants now?'"

A descendant of Russian immigrants, growing up over his Jewish family's store in the Watts section of Los Angeles clearly instilled liberal values in Waxman and turned him into a very savvy politician. During law school at the University of California (Los Angeles), Waxman became close friends with Howard Berman, and the two organized a group of young Democrats that put both of them on a path to Congress.

After six years in the California Assembly, Waxman won the seat of a retiring congressman in a district covering West Los Angeles and that later included West Hollywood, Santa Monica, and Beverly Hills, where he makes his home today.

In 1979, with only two terms under his belt, Waxman was named chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Health and Environment Subcommittee, and he quickly made clearing the air in smog-ridden Los Angeles a top priority. The effort would take more than a decade, as Waxman was pitted against Energy and Commerce Chairman John Dingell, who was determined to protect automakers in his Detroit district from costly requirements to clean up tailpipe emissions.

Ultimately Waxman and Dingell worked out compromises that led to enactment of Clean Air Act amendments in 1990 that greatly reduced urban smog, acid rain, and toxic emissions from power plants and factories. The battles with Dingell also taught Waxman some important lessons in legislative oversight that turned him into a pit bull on health and environmental issues.

He was instrumental in expanding Medicaid to cover all children and pregnant women living in poverty. He crafted the nation's first program for treating, preventing, and researching AIDS. And he exposed the perils of smoking in a way that, he would later write in a book, became a "turning point in our national history."

At a House hearing in 1994, Waxman called on seven top executives of tobacco companies to testify under oath whether they believed cigarettes were addictive. All said no. When one of them, James Johnston of R.J. Reynolds, argued that all products, from Coca-Cola to Twinkies, present some health risks, Waxman responded: "Yes, but the difference between cigarettes and Twinkies is death."

When Republicans took over Congress in 1995, Waxman became ranking member of the House Government Reform Committee and set up a team of investigators who probed pharmaceutical companies, government contractors in Iraq, mad-cow disease, and drinking water contamination in the District of Columbia.

The return of Democratic control in 2007 gave Waxman the gavel at the reconstituted Oversight and Government Reform Committee. One of his first hearings focused on whether the Bush administration had interfered with the work of climate scientists.

Waxman also turned the spotlight on the use of steroids in Major League Baseball, which resulted in one of his most infamous hearings. All-Star pitcher Roger Clemens was called to testify on whether he ever used performance-enhancing drugs, and his vehement denials later brought charges of perjury, making false statements, and obstructing Congress. Clemens was acquitted on all counts in 2012, and Waxman said the day after the hearing that he regretted holding it.

"I'm sorry we had the hearing," he said, adding that Clemens emerged from it unnecessarily "sullied."

Waxman went up against Dingell again in 2009, this time for the chairmanship of the Energy and Commerce Committee. It was a coup that took some veterans of Congress by surprise, but Waxman later said his winning the gavel on a 137-122 vote in the Democratic caucus was not meant as a slap at Dingell, the longest-serving member of Congress in history.

"It wasn't the lack of respect that caused me to challenge him for that position as chairman," Waxman told *National Journal* last year. Instead, with a Democrat back in the White House and a chance to make real progress on health and environmental issues, Waxman said he thought "I would do a better job. I ran on that basis, and I was able to convince the majority of the caucus."

The result was two major legislative initiatives, one that fell flat and one that was a resounding success for President Obama.

In 2009, Waxman and then-Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., pushed a cap-and-trade bill aimed at reducing carbon-dioxide emissions through the House, only to have it die in the Senate.

The following year, Waxman played a key role in shepherding the Affordable Care Act through a deeply divided Congress, an accomplishment he highlighted in his announcement Thursday that he will not seek a 21st term in the House this fall.

"Expanding health coverage to those in need has been one of my driving passions," Waxman said in a statement. "In the 1980s, I led the fight to expand Medicaid, providing health coverage to millions of low-income children, pregnant women, and seniors. In the 1990s, I worked with Senator Ted Kennedy to provide coverage to the children of working families through the Children's Health Insurance Program. And in 2010, when I was chair of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, one of my lifelong dreams was finally achieved: Congress passed the Affordable Care Act, which guarantees access to affordable health coverage to all Americans."

Waxman acknowledged in his retirement announcement that that "there are elements of Congress today that I do not like," but he said he still enjoys the job.

"I still feel youthful and energetic, but I recognize if I want to experience a life outside of Congress, I need to start soon," he said.

"Public office is not the only way to serve, and I want to explore other avenues while I still can."

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